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STATE FOR NEA/PPD, NEA/ARPI
LONDON FOR ARAB MEDIA OFFICE

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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [PREL](#) [OA](#) [ALJAZEERA](#)

SUBJECT: Al Jazeera website director to quit; start new newspaper

1. (SBU) Summary: The director of the Al Jazeera Arabic website, Abdulaziz Al Mahmoud, said he is quitting his Al Jazeera job to take up the chief editorship of an Arabic newspaper called "Al Arab", which will become the fourth Arabic daily newspaper on the Qatari market. Al Mahmoud is the only senior Qatari at Al Jazeera - which has just a handful of Qatari employees - and ascribed his desire to leave Al Jazeera to disillusionment with the channel and a difficult relationship with AJ Managing Director Wadah Khanfar. End summary.

Abdulaziz Al Mahmoud

2. (SBU) The new Chief Editor of Al Arab, Abdulaziz Al Mahmoud, is a close Embassy contact. A U.S.-educated Qatari citizen, he graduated from New York state's Clarkson University in 1988 as a mechanical engineer. Al Mahmoud served as the commanding officer of the Technical Training School of the Qatari Armed Forces prior to becoming chief editor of the Arabic daily Al Sharq from 1998 until 2001. In July 2001 Al Mahmoud became chief editor of Al Jazeera.net. Until last year, he was in charge of both the Arabic and English versions of the website. A few months ago, control of the English website was handed over to Al Jazeera International and its editor-in-chief is currently British national Russell Merryman.

The trouble with Al Jazeera

3. (SBU) Al Mahmoud told PAO that working at Al Jazeera these days is frustrating compared to what it was when he joined in 2001. In the old days, he said, Al Jazeera was buzzing with idealism and alive with passionate debate between partisans of different ideologies (Arab nationalists, Islamists, secularists, socialists etc), and that it had a genuinely revolutionary atmosphere about it. Now, he said, people come to work from 9 to 5 like bureaucrats and Al Jazeera has become part of the mainstream establishment. He also said his relationship with AJ Managing Director Wadah Khanfar had become "difficult", but did not elaborate on the reasons for this.

The Deputy Chief Editor

4. (SBU) The deputy chief editor of Al Arab will be Qatari citizen Mohammed Hajji, a former IV and another good Embassy contact. Mohammed Hajji is a law graduate from Beirut University's branch in Alexandria, Egypt. Hajji joined Al Sharq as a reporter and moved to Al Watan newspaper as an editor in 2001. Hajji traveled to the US in February 2004 to participate in a State Department-funded IV program on Foreign Policy and Decision Making process. PAS is currently funding an English language course for Mr. Hajji in a local English language institute.

Al Arab

5. (U) Founded in 1972, Al Arab was Qatar's first post-independence Arabic newspaper. It was headed by the late Abdallah Hussein Nem'ma, a prominent Qatari intellectual who occupied the position of chief editor until his death. Al Arab was shut down in 1995, following his death. The Al Arab license was reportedly sold by the Al Nem'ma family to Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Hamad Bin Jassim Al Thani (HBJ) in the 1990s. Post has learned that HBJ's partner in the "new" Al Arab enterprise is Sheikh Thani bin Abdallah Al Thani, who is also the Chairman of the Board of Qatar's Al Sharq newspaper. Publication is expected to begin in the next several months.

Comment

6. (SBU) With a population of less than one million, the majority of whom do not speak Arabic, Qatar is not in need

of a fourth Arabic language newspaper, particularly as Al Arab is not designed to fill a particular vacant news niche. All three current Arabic newspapers tend to print the same information, with only slight variations in editorial bent, and we do not expect Al Arab to be any different. The main attraction of newspapers in Qatar would appear to be their business value. The advertising revenues earned by all five local papers are reportedly considerable.

17. (SBU) Comment continued: Although Qatari-funded and Qatari-controlled, Al Jazeera has few Qataris on its staff, possibly due in part to the fact that the overall number of practicing Qatari journalists is relatively small. Al Mahmoud's departure means the loss of AJ's only senior Qatari manager. His replacement at Al Jazeera.net has not yet been named.

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